



Feb 26

## America Needs to Care About the Dreamers

*candace baker*

On September 5th of last year, the Trump administration made a political move that many anticipated yet still dreaded. That morning, Attorney General Jeff Sessions officially announced that The Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA), a program that protected hundreds of thousands of young undocumented immigrants from deportation, would be ending. In a tweet posted later that evening, President Trump clarified DACA's future:

"Congress now has 6 months to legalize DACA (something the Obama Administration was unable to do). If they can't, I will revisit this issue!"

The fate of these immigrants had been handed to a severely divided political institution.

The U.S. Congress doesn't have the best track record when it comes to protecting the "Dreamers," or individuals who entered the U.S. illegally as minors and who are supposed to be protected by DACA. The DREAM Act, which would have allowed undocumented immigrants who came to the U.S. before their 16th birthday to be granted a path to permanent residency, failed to pass in both 2001 and 2010. It was because of this failure that DACA was initiated in June of 2012 by then-president Obama.

The program laid out specific criteria for qualification, including that applicants must pass a criminal

From the start, DACA was controversial. Several Republicans felt that it was an abuse of executive power and therefore should have never been created in the first place. There was even a 2013 attempt to defund the program. But for the tenure of the Obama administration, it seemed that these young immigrants were here to stay.

Then came Donald Trump and the Republican-controlled Congress.

From the moment he announced his presidential campaign, his platform was defined greatly by his promise to crack down on illegal immigration. In his announcement speech, he promised to “build a great wall” that Mexico would pay for and infamously called Mexican immigrants “rapists” who are “bringing drugs” and “bringing crime.” It was in this same speech that he first promised to “immediately terminate” DACA.

After he was elected, however, Trump softened his tone on the issue. He focused on the deportation of undocumented individuals with criminal records, and when asked point blank what his plans for DACA were, he pointed out that it was a “difficult subject” for him and that ultimately he would “show great heart.” For a while, it seemed that DACA could have a chance at living through the new administration.

What ultimately changed the president’s mind is hard to discern. Despite what many like to think, Trump didn’t end DACA out of a deep hatred for Dreamers, who he has previously called “incredible.” While he may not have had a personal vendetta against them, he was so indifferent to their fate that he didn’t hesitate to use them as pawns in the political game. If a DACA bill failed to pass, he could blame it on Democrats. If it was successful, then he could taut his victory to voters as if they would forget that he was the one that ended that program in the first place.

Most important, however, Trump found a way to hold the future of the Dreamers hostage as a way to finally get funding for the border wall that he promised throughout his entire presidential campaign. One particular tweet from the president during the DACA negotiations made it perfectly clear what he wanted:

“Cryin’ Chuck Schumer fully understands, especially after his humiliating defeat, that if there is no Wall, there is no DACA. We must have safety and security, together with a strong Military, for our great people!”

Despite the recent failure of the U.S. Congress to pass a DACA bill -- putting the status of the Dreamers back into limbo -- the American public still wholeheartedly supports the Dreamers. While immigration itself is a contentious issue and has been for decades, the plight of the Dreamers stands out in the debate. They’re educated in American institutions and are free of any sort of criminal history. They pay \$2 billion in taxes every year to support programs from which they don’t benefit, such as Medicaid. Some of them are married

to Americans and have children who are American citizens. They became Americans in every facet except for their legal statuses.

So, the ultimate question is whether we should treat these individuals as undocumented foreigners or as Americans who are victims of circumstance.

These are not people who chose to circumvent the legal system for the sake of doing so. They came to the U.S. illegally based on the decisions of their parents, not themselves. For all intents and purposes, they did what they were supposed to do. When DACA was initiated in 2012, hundreds of thousands of Dreamers came out of hiding, disclosing their information with the hope that they wouldn't have to be afraid of being sent back to countries many no longer remembered.

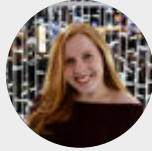
That information and faith is now being used against them by the institutions that they trusted.

Aside from the crushing blow to the United States' credibility that Dreamer deportations would bring, they would also cost the government nearly \$10 billion, which is twice the annual budget for U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE). It would reduce the size of the U.S. economy by hundreds of billions of dollars. The sudden loss of 800,000 members of the workforce would be a strain on both the tax base and labor resources that would be difficult to overcome.

For now, it seems that the only thing that can be given to the Dreamers is more time. While President Trump had initially set a deadline of March 5th to begin phasing out DACA, a judge ruled on January 9th that the administration would have to continue receiving renewal applications for existing DACA recipients, even if their protections were set to expire after the established date.

There are some who would contend that an individual without legal status is simply not an American. The 900 Dreamers who are in the military? Get them out. The 9,000 teachers and 14,000 healthcare workers? They should've come here legally in the first place.

The human and economic cost of ending DACA is not worth the victory for Trump. Despite his willingness to use the Dreamers as a bargaining chip to get his promised border wall, these are individuals with drive and potential. Despite this administration's refusal to acknowledge that America is a nation built on the stories of immigrants, any sort of success in deporting those who have adopted it as home since childhood would be simply un-American.



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